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*Herstories. Digital social archives  
as a space for building memory  
about women  
(presentation of the research area)*

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“The interest in the past is one of the special signs of our times” – these are the words with which Łucja Kaprańska (2017: 123) opens up her reflections on the socio-cultural conditions of the actions observed today, aimed at the digitisation of cultural goods. I would also like to begin with them; after all, these words, I think, describe not only the aforementioned practices of digitisation, but also all other activities aimed at saving or constructing<sup>1</sup> the memory of the past. The culture of memory and discourses of memory occupy a central position in the public sphere, as narratives about the past are not only a part of culture (Wójcicka 2018: 73), but they also combine the past, present and future (Nowak 2011: 12). As Barbara Szacka says, “group imaginations are being transformed according to their own cultural standards and beliefs” (Szacka 2006: 45, cf. also Biskupska 2011: 28), which we are witnessing today (one can mention here the example of renegotiating the memory of the Round Table (Witosz 2014: 13), about Lech Wałęsa, reconstructing the image of the cursed soldiers e.g. in nationalist discourse). Following the words of

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<sup>1</sup> On the constructivist and, consequently, subjective character of the memory in: Czachur 2018, Szacka 2012, Biskupska 2014, Nowak 2011.

Pierre Nora, the most important thing is not “what the past really was,” but how it is exploited, used and abused (Nora 2014: 23).

Practices related to memory, remembrance, commemoration, and the ‘use’ of the memory of the past are eagerly undertaken by various entities today. One can list here social actors whose activities are of an institutional nature, and thus fall within the framework of historical policy, official memory. The activities for commemoration are also undertaken by entities operating from the bottom up. An example of such an activity is the social archives (SA), a fragment of which, profiled thematically, concentrates around herstories and which I have made the subject of my interest. Due to the limited volume of the paper, I will not characterise the phenomenon of social archives; another text concentrates on this subject, and is a part of this publication.

However, before I move on to the presentation of the area of social activity related to herstory practices and the presentation of the possibilities of its research from a discursive (and, more broadly, linguistic) perspective, I should quote the way of understanding the term *herstory* and the contexts in which it functions. The concept of *herstory* emerged thanks to an American writer, publicist and social activist Robin Morgan, a second wave feminist, to describe the history of women. At first, it functioned in the context of an ideological social movement. The essence of the then developing radical feminism movement was the postulate to exchange the patriarchal system for a new one, dominated by women’s experiences (Witczak 2016: 67). According to Craig Owens, its implementation can be achieved by stopping representing women and replacing this position with the “permanent presence of the female voice” (as cited in Witczak 2016: 67). This understanding of herstory, relativised to the cultural context in which it was created, brings to the foreground the point of view from which the past and the place women occupy in it can be described.

Today, the concept of *herstory* is also present in the context of research and in the sphere of bottom-up social activity, where, among other things, thanks to the social archives and entities involved in the idea, it is becoming more and more popular, and herstories are becoming an inspiration to undertake various types of practices. Let us look at the first of these contexts.

In the field of research, *herstory* appears as the name of the feminist and research sub-discipline, which aims at “discovering and writing a history of women that has not existed before” (Kuźma-Markowska 2014: 35). It defines

its object of research, i.e. herstories, as the evocation of stories and people from the cultural and social peripheries. It consists in making public and evoking from behind the scenes a narrative reserved until now for the private sphere, sometimes hidden under the cover of what is considered “personal,” “subjective” or “intimate” (Kuźma, Pietrzak, online: 47).

Herstories understood in this way have found their place in the studies of researchers representing various fields and disciplines. The dominant perspective is gender studies. In this research area, we should first mention the achievements of Dobrochna Kałwa, a historian who is also involved in the projects of the Women’s Space Foundation [Fundacja Przestrzeń Kobiet]. She describes, among other things, World War II from a gender perspective (2015) and women’s activity in the interwar period (2002); she co-edited a volume devoted to the history of ordinary women and ordinary men (2007). Additionally, sociological and anthropological publications on women going against the current, and rebellious women have been published (ed. Desperak, Kuźma 2015, 2017) as well as educational and historical studies addressing the important issue of women’s absence from history textbooks (Chmura-Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2013, 2015). Edyta Pietrzak and Inga Kuźma conducted research using the assumptions of herstory within the international project *Europe for Citizens* entitled *Women, War and Peace* (WWP). The researchers presented war stories of women from Łódź. Historians are also involved in the women’s issue (the state of research was presented by Maria Bogucka in 1993). As Agnieszka Mroziak writes (2011), historical research with the use of feminist criticism was initiated by prof. Andrzej Szwarc and prof. Anna Żarnowska. The *gender studies* perspective is, of course, also used in literature studies.

The concept of *herstory* also functions outside the academic community. It is around the issue/theme of herstory that part of the social archives focus. Within this framework, herstory is defined as:

The perspective of women’s space recovery and women’s inclusion in an equivalent historical narrative, initiated by second-wave feminist activists and researchers in the USA. The word itself is a neologism created on the basis of the expression *his story* and its transformation into *her story* (Herstory Foundation, <https://archiwumherstoryczne.pl/>, access: 17 September 2018).

Herstorical initiatives are therefore bottom-up and local (cf. Kaprańska 2017), the primary goal of which is to restore the collective memory of the

achievements and history of women. The internet database on the history of women in Poland is overseen by the Archive of Women's History [Archiwum Historii Kobiet] ([www.herstorie.pl](http://www.herstorie.pl)), the administrator of which is the Women's Space Foundation. The archive gathers "biographies of emancipation activists and other important figures for the history of women in Poland, descriptions of places important for the women's emancipation movement, presents routes following in the footsteps of emancipated women in various places in Poland, as well as descriptions of herstorical initiatives carried out in various Polish cities, towns and villages" (<http://www.herstorie.pl/>, access: 17 September 2018). The archive is a kind of herstorical network, as it refers to activities and projects other than just social archives (such as films, trails and walking routes). Initiatives of collecting, digitising and publishing memorial sites in the space of digital social archives (DSA)<sup>2</sup> are implemented by communities, such as Trójmieście (Metropolitanka), Milanówka (Milanowianki Association), Muranowa (Warszefroj) or Lublin. It is in Lublin, as we read on the website, "in the field of equality, diversity, anti-discrimination, multiculturalism and human rights" that the HerStory Foundation operates (<http://fundacjaherstory.org/>, access: 17 September 2018).

Herstories, especially those collected by digital social archives, are not in the field of interest of linguists' discourse<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, the herstorical texts collected in DSA, as well as all herstorical undertakings to which DSAs refer, constitute a graceful and cognitively interesting subject for the analysis of the discourse. The possibility of applying the discursive perspective to the research examination of herstory is determined by the category of the constitutive point of view for both discourse and herstory. Cf:

[...] herstory is a natural consequence of the need to rethink Polish history from my, and thus also women's, point of view. I think of history as a narrative in which we constantly ask who we are. [...] Such a definition of history assumes relativity of experience and

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of order, it should be noted that in the Internet space, apart from DSA, there are also other initiatives focused on the issue of herstory, such as *Aleja Włóknarek* (Marta Madejska's blog); *Herstoria. Historia kobiet, kobiety w historii* [Herstory. History of Women, Women in History] (Anna Nowakowska-Wierchoś's blog); *Jej Historie* [Her Stories] (Anna Sadowska's blog); *Kobiety w polityce* [Women in politics] (Sebastian Kotlarz's website); *Widoczki* [Little Landscapes] (Patrycja Dołwa's blog); *Invisible inVisible/Niewidzialne widzialnego* (Anka Leśniak's project concerning "non-localised" women in history <http://www.invisiblewomen.info/projekt.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Discursive gender studies are carried out by Natalia Krzyżanowska; however, these are, first of all, sociological studies, and secondly, they do not include the issue of herstory.

the constant need to reinterpret the past, especially from other than traditional points of view (Stachniak 2010: 74).

A discursive view of herstory is also supported by memory, which is the central category of herstory. Herstories evoke images/knowledge about events, people from the past, which are the content of memory (Czachur 2018: 25). Memory, as well as discourse, is a social construct; it is entitled to interpretative and subjective features (cf. Nowak 2011: 12, Szacka 2012:16, Witosz 2014: 13). Herstories can, therefore, be considered as memory discourses/herstorical discourses, i.e. “a specific form of activation [of past events – B.C.] and profiling of this knowledge” (Czachur 2018: 25). This qualification opens up a number of research opportunities.

As the first step, however, let us determine the place of the herstorical discourse on the map of contemporary discourse types and let us define its social function. This is an important issue for the interpretative framework of processes taking place in contemporary culture (Witosz 2016: 28) as well as for emerging research perspectives. The socio-political situation of women places them in a lower position than men, which is reflected in language (Rejter 2013), but also in historiography (Michelle Perrot’s recognition of women as shadows of history (Witczak 2016: 65)). Herstorical practices undertaken within the DSA are therefore definitely part of the anti-discrimination and equality discourse, which is entering the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> The perspective on the world taken by the DSA creators places women in a discursive position of the excluded, i.e. those who are deprived of their full rights, including the right to full representation in the socio-cultural sphere and in history. Herstorical practices can therefore be seen as part of the *memory boom*, which consists in the fact that “various minorities<sup>5</sup>, including the gender ones, are calling for the reconstruction and reinterpretation of their history, but also for the public preservation of the memory of it” (Cornleissen 2014: 249). Recalling women’s history aims not only to fill in the “white spots” (Kuźma, Pietrzak online, 47), but also to construct a discourse on counter-history. It is a discourse that is in contrast to the great historical narratives filled with

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<sup>4</sup> This is how their social role is perceived by, e.g. Her Story Foundation, Fundacja na rzecz Równości i Emancypacji „Ster” [“Ster” [Rudder] Foundation for Equality and Emancipation].

<sup>5</sup> Treating women as minorities seems inappropriate and somewhat strange, however, in the context of discourses of memory and culture of memory, as well as historiography, but also a successful categorisation (cf. Bogucka 1993: 180)

male heroes and naturalising the social order based on male domination, which is unjust from the point of view of the DSA creators (Solarzka 2011: 72, Cornleissen 2014: 249). From the socio-cultural context of herstories, the concepts of power, domination, unequal social relations, discrimination and exclusion emerge, concentrated around the critical discourse (Witosz 2014: 29). The application of this research perspective may aim to show the mechanisms for overcoming male domination and the androcentric vision of history, and therefore the vision of the world. Adopting a slightly broader perspective allows us to place the activities of herstorians<sup>6</sup> within the framework of an equality and tolerance discourse and to describe its rules. An overview of their activities with an emphasis on the practical dimension makes it possible to indicate methods of anti-discrimination education and strategies of activities aimed at building social dialogue (such activities are carried out, for example, by the HerStory Foundation or the Metropolitanka Foundation).

Discursive analysis of herstorical DSA also draws attention to the subjects – the creators of social archives. As Kamila Biskupska writes, “the way in which the past is constructed depends [...] on what values are professed but also sought after in the contemporary world” (2011: 28). A close look at the creators of herstorical projects, including DSA<sup>7</sup> creators, will allow us to re-construct the identity of local communities, their ideological option, axiological system and hierarchy of values, as well as the group aspirations that create them. In looking at the identity of the DSA creators, it will also be important to consider the role played in its creation by the local community around which social archives are built. Thanks to social archives, “what should be commemorated from the point of view of a given group is remembered and commemorated” (Kapralzka 2017: 126). One of the aspects of the identity of the initiators of herstorical projects is social activism. Its contemporary image emerges, for example, from the publication of the Women’s Space Foundation entitled *Herstorians*. Focusing the researcher’s attention on, among other things, the function that herstorians perform in society, on their role in arranging the field of activity for members of local communities and the social effects of cooperation within the framework of herstorical projects will

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<sup>6</sup> Herstorians are women involved in the collection and dissemination of herstories.

<sup>7</sup> Analytical material is delivered by, e.g., available free-of-charge publications of Fundacja Przestrzeń Kobiet *Herstoryczki* [Women’s Space Foundation *Herstorians*], Kraków 2016.



enrich reflections on civil discourse and practices of building social capital (about the role of social archives in this area: Kapralska 2017: 126).

After the presentation of the possibility of describing the herstorical discourse in terms of the subject matter, it is time to move on to its object matter dimension, which also opens up a few cognitively attractive issues for the discourse researcher. The first of them is undoubtedly the constructions of femininity and woman that emerge from the herstorical discourse, defining her identity features, attitudes, as well as the domain of women's activity and the relations in which she is/was entangled. We know a lot about the works presenting the image of a woman, but the value of descriptive portraits contained in herstorical DSA, is the presentation of authentic figures (situated next to literary analyses of the images of womanhood) and women, whose activity was concentrated in the local space (e.g. Milanowianki), and whose names did not necessarily appear in the front pages of newspapers. Herstories therefore also provide knowledge about ordinary and average women. The situation is different in research herstories. Here, the fate of women known and already present in official discourses of remembrance is mainly recollected (it is enough to recall the names of e.g. Eliza Orzeszkowa, Pola Gojawiczyńska, Helena Rubinstein, Elizabeth Arden). In addition, the diversity of herstorical DSA allows us to see women's categories in a broader cultural context, in which ethnic, religious, professional and social criteria are taken into account, as well as individual experiences as determinants of the shape of woman's/women's identities. Herstories present the silhouettes of Jewish women from Warsaw and Lublin, women working in the Gdańsk Shipyard and images of artists who appeared there after the collapse of the shipyard, and women who co-created that place<sup>8</sup>, portraits of professors, MPs, advocates of women's rights, participants of great historical events (the Warsaw Uprising, strikes) or heroines of urban femininity. Thanks to such a broad perspective, the herstories gathered in DSA show women's identity not as

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<sup>8</sup> Gdańsk Shipyard is in line with the trend of post-industrial urban places and is associated with art. At the beginning of the century, the investors who bought the shipyard decided to promote it as a fashionable and attractive place to live, inviting artists there. This is how were established famous in Poland places, such as Kolonia Artystów [Colony of Artists], Willa Dyrektora [Director's Villa], or Modelarnia [The Modeller's Shop]. Women who co-created these places and their program are, among others, the following: Bożena Eltermann from Cynada Theatre, curator Jolanta Woszczenko, visual artists Iwona Zając, Magdalena Małyjasiak, Agata Nowosielska, Ania Witkowska, Marzena Niećko-Gawrysiak, DJka Kristi" (<http://metropolitanka.ikm.gda.pl/trasa-a-artystki-stoczni/>, access: 15 September 2018.).



homogeneous, but as multidimensional and dynamic. Above all, they seem to break the stereotype maintained by the dominant patriarchal culture, which considers the private, domestic sphere as a typical space for the realisation of women's identity and women's dispositions.

(Auto)biographical and remembrance<sup>9</sup> narratives contained in DSA can be considered in a genealogical context, taking into account the way they are built, narrated, etc. In herstories presented in DSA, there is no clear distinction between first-person and third-person stories; the key determinant is considered to be the point of view and the heroine. One of the issues to be identified would therefore be the determination of the species exponents of herstories.

The second context of the deliberations is the stylistic aspect. Style is important for constructing and transferring memory; it is the practice of memory (Wójcicka 2017: 33). The assumptions of anthropological stylistics, which emphasise the subjective character of the style, a key parameter also for the identity of the discourse, seem to be particularly useful for the relation between the two categories understood in this way (see Witosz 2012: 68). Drawing attention to objects (events, characters) extracted from oblivion, their evaluation as well as their intentionality, the type of rationality and the point of view from which the interpretation of the past is made, i.e. the style values indicated by Bartmiński (2001), allows us to reconstruct a discursive image of the past world (DIW) and to profile its phenomena. Focusing on the aforementioned style values makes it possible to specify the stylistic features of herstories (e.g. in the story of the strike of August 1980 or the Warsaw Uprising from the point of view of its participants). It also seems worth taking up the challenge to look at the style of narration about the past and the DIW integrated with it in the comparative aspect – juxtaposition of the female style of herstories, the perspective of perception of the world (and thus what remains in the field of view of the subject looking at it) with the shaping of these categories in stories constructed by men or in images of the past that dominate in cultural space.

Another problem worthy of a research description is related to the new type of carriers/memorial sites proposed by DSA creators. I am thinking here

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<sup>9</sup> I mean the texts that are fully available, but also those to which links can be found on websites, e.g. to the film made by the Feminoteka Foundation *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki* [Uprising in a Flower Blouse].

of walking trails in commemoration of women, e.g. artistic and cultural trails of Lublin residents, the Kraków Women's Trail<sup>10</sup>, a walk through the Gdańsk Shipyard<sup>11</sup>, through the Old and New Town of Gdańsk, thanks to which we learn "the history of (extra)ordinary women, known and unknown heroines [...], e.g. the first female dress reformer Clara Stryowska-Baedeker, co-creator of the Polish amateur theatre in Gdańsk, a pilot and speedway judge Irena Nadolna-Szatyłowska, novelist Jadwiga Łuszczewska, [...], postwoman Marianna Selonka [...]"<sup>12</sup> and many more. A research view of the content presented in these projects, this time with a shift in emphasis to the space in which the herstories took place, makes it possible to reconstruct the image of the city. If we consider the buildings, monuments and all constructions filling the urban space as pseudo-texts (Czachur 2018: 22) or as texts in a broad, semiotic perspective, we can treat them as signs that we can not only read and interpret each time (Czachur 2018: 21), but also, as actors of specific discourses, we can **give** them new meaning. The description of the city seen through the eyes of the female protagonists deconstructs its previous vision and includes a marginalised female perspective in the discursive image of the city. Research interest in herstories can therefore enrich research on urban discourse. Numerous photographs of women collected in herstorical DSA, in turn, can be the subject of multimodal discourse analysis.

The last issue that seems to me to be interesting and worth considering, and thus I allow myself to discuss it a little more, concerns the processes of remembrance, recollecting, forgetting, and constructing of herstories. The question I am trying to answer is the following: Do herstories resemble or only construct women's history (and collective memory about it) in the **social-consciousness**, or at least include it in the framework of collective memory,

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the offered trails are available as smartphone apps.

<sup>11</sup> „The project [Metropolitanki – B.C.'s note] shows the Gdańsk Shipyard as seen by women gantry operators, engineers, cleaning ladies or office workers. We can find out how their work in the Shipyard influenced their lives. We can learn the history of a rebellious gantry operator, an animator of culture and Solidarity [Solidarność] activists as well as the everyday life during the strike in August 1980. When visiting, we can hear many anecdotes curiosities, e.g. on the shipyard gardens, where tulips and carnations were planted which were distributed among women on the Women's Day. We can also find out where the Director's villa was, the Modelling shop and hall 46A, behind the graffiti, „Tatusiu! Pracuj bezpiecznie” [Daddy, work safely], in which Anna Walentynowicz was the gantry operator” (<http://metropolitanka.ikm.gda.pl/dzialania/zwiedzanie/zwiedzanie-stoczni/>, access: 15 September 2018).

<sup>12</sup> <http://metropolitanka.ikm.gda.pl/dzialania/zwiedzanie/stare-miasto/>, access: 15 September 2018.

public memory discourses or culture of memory? After all, one recalls something that was remembered and discussed (cf. the definition in Dictionary of the Polish language [SJP] issued by PWN: “to recall – to evoke in memory past events, previously experienced impressions, experiences, etc.”<sup>13</sup>). As Jan Assman writes, “Memory lives in communication and thanks to it, if communication is broken [...] or the frame of reference disappears, it is forgotten. We only remember what we communicate and what we can place within the framework of references to social memory” (cited in Czachur 2018: 14). Since women are therefore absent from history, because the historical narrative has been oriented masculinistically (Witczak 2016: 64), and at school we are dealing with “a story created by men, from their perspective and about men” (Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska, Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech, Izabela Skórzyńska 2015: 9), it is difficult to deny that the history of women does not occupy an important position either in collective/official memory or in public discourse, which, like memory, is a part of culture (Wójcicka 2018: 74) and constitutes culture. Therefore, one may doubt whether herstories are a testimony to the remembrance of women’s fates, or rather resemble the process of extracting them from “collective oblivion” (Kwiatkowski 2014: 273).

Another argument in favour of the fact that the history of women is only being **publicly** constructed, framed, incorporated into the history of mankind, can be seen, for example, in the ways of gathering knowledge about the fate of women which have been observed, e.g. in DSA. Herstories are created from scattered stories, family collections, or, as Women of Muranów write, as a result of searching for **traces** of women, following their footsteps, digging in archives<sup>14</sup>. **Unknown** histories of women participating in major national events are only **discovered** by Polish or Irish feminist organisations (Kuźma, Pietrzak, online: 46). It seems that in most cases herstories are extracted from private, ephemeral and dormant memory (Golka 2009: 25–27, 32). The very definition of herstory also sheds light on the opposition of the centre versus the periphery, and the public versus the private. Herstories, of course, have the characteristic of the peripheral and private, i.e. what is outside the dominant discourse, which has the power to influence the social order and which is at the centre of historians’ interest (Witczak 2016: 64). “Magdalena

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<sup>13</sup> <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/przypomina%C4%87.html>, access: 15 September 2018.

<sup>14</sup> <https://warszefroj.wordpress.com/about/>, access: 15 September 2018.

Środa claims that women, who for reasons of limitations and stereotypes functioned for centuries mainly in the private sphere – ignored by historians – are deprived of their own history as well as common and shared memory” (Chmura-Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2013: 51). All this leads me to the conclusion, which perhaps requires even greater reflection, that the history of women, which currently functions in **public** discourse, has a mosaic and patchwork character, and is **created** only from scattered fragments, stacks, scraps, and fragments of memory.

To sum up my reflections, I would like to emphasise the cognitive benefits that come from the discursive research on herstories. These include the enrichment of knowledge about the rules of many types of discourse: equal, anti-discrimination, civic, urban. The research view of herstory also broadens the state of knowledge in the area of stylistics; it reports on the determinants of feminine style and the point of view on the perception of reality. The social effects of discursive interest in herstories or, referring to Nora’s observations, discursive “use” of herstories, cannot be overestimated, either. Herstories deal with the important issue of including women’s history, their voice and their way of seeing the world in the public sphere.

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*Herstories. digital social archives as a space for building memory about women (presentation of the research area)*

The aim of the article is to shape the field of scientific exploration which is opening in the internet space as a social archive. It is a space for building herstories – women’s histories as well as social memory about them. The author refers to the definition of herstory by presenting a variety of contexts in which the concept functions: ideological, scientific, and that which is created by bottom-up initiatives of social archival science. Herstoric discourse, being shaped in the space of digital social archives, fits into the intense and changing public discourse on equality. A discursive overview of herstory will enhance our knowledge not only of equality/anti-discriminative discourse regulations, but also about civil or urban discourse. What is more, it will provide new findings on the topic of women’s style and point of view. There are also valuable social effects of discursive interest in herstories – they can contribute to including women’s histories, their voices and way of thinking about the world into the public sphere.

**Keywords:** *herstory, social archives, memory, discourse*

